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**TED 707 | Final Paper**

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The term *literacy* traditionally refers to “the mastery of skills, processes, and understandings in making meaning from and through written text” (Luke and Woods, 2009). *New Literacies*, as they relate to adolescent literature in the middle school classroom, are literacies encompassing a digital or technological basis. They are also summed up as “*Web 2.0,* or ‘participatory tools’ used to create, interact, publish, and to share with audiences, groups, and other social environments online” (Kajder, 9). According to Henry Jenkins, in his article *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture,* these new, digital literacies do not replace traditional forms of literacy. Instead, they build upon the foundation of traditional forms of literacy (2009).

As reported by the Joint Information Systems Committee, an education-based non-profit, “90% of new jobs will require excellent digital skills”, and “improving digital literacy is an essential component of developing employable graduates.” My job as a teacher is to prepare my students for their futures. Teaching new literacies in the early grades and reinficing this learning throughout the later grades is imperative. Foranzi and Leu agree: “all students must start learning new literacy skills early if they are to gain the skills they will need as adults” (2012, 421). By creating an actual Wikispaces webpage with my own examples of multi-modal digital compositions, I was able to use actual digital literacy strategies and skills taught in this course. This hands-on experience is important because, as reported in *A Classroom With a View: Teachers, Multimodality, and New Leteracies* (2008) “children to adults are using digital media to capture, develop, produce, and publish all types of projects, especially in literacy and ELA classes” (3).

Whole book reads were used to inspire the class projects, while a text of our own choosing were used for our Wikispaces page. The text I chose for my Wiki was *The Graveyard Book*, by Neil Gaiman (2008). This book as based on a timeless classic: *The Jungle Book,* by Rudyard Kipling. In *The Graveyard Book,* the protagonist, Bod, is adopted and raised by ghosts in a graveyard. These ghosts protect Bod as he navigates young adolescence and unravels the secrecy surrounding his parent’s and sister’s mysterious murder that left him as an infant orphan. My Wiki, entitled *Beyond the Grave,* can be found at <http://emilynelsonuwrf.wikispaces.com/>.

Although I consider myself to be fairly technologically adept, this class proved challenging for me. I quickly discovered that being computer-literate is not synonymous with being digitally-literate. The speed at which new technologies and web-based applications are being developed is difficult to keep up with. The World Wide Web has changed a lot during the past decade, and new technologies are being invented each day. As a teacher, I do not have to be an expert in all of these different technologies, but I do have to be open to allowing my students to use them to respond, explore, and create. Kajder states that “digital media is more relevant to students than traditional media” (9). Digital literacy in the classroom is not about the technology used: it is about it being relevant to our students and the response to literature that it elicits.

This class has given me experience with responding to adolescent literature in different ways. Some traditional literacy strategies were used, such as: classroom discussions, literature circles, and writing scripts and narratives. By also incorporating digital literacies in to the classroom we not only tap into the knowledge, cognitive, and personal domains of learning, but also the fourth social domain through the ability to literally share our projects with the world. Kajder highlights this by stating that digital media is summed up as having three main functions: “content creating, information production and use, and interacting within a community/network” (15). Throughout the semester, each digital project was scaffolded by the ones before –first, a small project using only voice and images, and lastly, a final project using voice, video, images, music, and text.

The first project, **Thematic Braiding,** combined identifying theme, citing evidence, and making connections with digital technology: in this case, Google Documents and images from Flickr Creative Commons. While I used *The Graveyard Book* as my inspiration for the second Thematic Braiding on my personal Wiki, the classroom novel used for this first project was *Smile*, by Raina Tegelmeir. *Smile* is a graphic novel, and is considered to be a type of new literacy in itself because it combines both written word and images. Graphic novels, such as *Smile,* are a new medium for me. This was the first of its kind that I have ever read. Graphic novels may be able to draw in reluctant readers and I will definitely offer them in my classroom as a choice for my students.

The second project, a **Character Sketch Journal,** combines first person narrative writing and character voice with a digital tool (VoiceThread). VoiceThreads is simple and easy to use. Students can use it to compose a visual art piece. There are literary elements woven in, of course - students must write a script based on research or careful examination of a text, allowing for free choice and creative expression. In order to perform this examination, students must thoroughly understand the text. Kajder states: “the work a reader does in comprehending texts is hefty, including but not limited to activating prior knowledge, making connections between and within texts, predicting, inferring, organizing, and holding onto details” (68).

This project emphasized common core standards relating to speaking, listening, articulation, fluency, comprehension, predicting, inferring, and story elements (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.2, 6.3, and 6.6). As students, we were encouraged to also focus on metaphors and empathizing with our chosen character –an additional Common Core Standard (CCSS L.4.5a). Although *Smile* was the inspiration for this classroom project, a second Character Sketch Journal was created and posted on my Wiki as a response to *The Graveyard Book*. Character Sketch Journals inspire students to relate to a certain character – to get inside his or her head, so to speak, and portray the character with a series of still images and a narrative script based on five of the book chapters. This teaches perspective and allows students to relate to and gain a deeper meaning from the text (CCSS Reading Standards 1-10.)

**Digital Poetry,** the third project, puts a new spin on written poetry. Through scaffolding prior knowledge from the first two projects, we were able to use an application of our choice (in my case, MovieMaker) to create a video of a poem using music, text, and voice. Students who struggle to put their thoughts into words would find real success with this project. As Stuart reports in her article *Cin(E)-Poetry*, “many of our middle level students are visual learners.” This project is very visual and allows for a wide range of student abilities.

The book that was used to inspire this project was *Wonder*, by R.J. Palacio. This first digital poem was created and posted on our class Wiki. *The Graveyard Book* was used for my personal Wiki Page Digital Poem. A quote from *Voices in the Middle: from Page to Digital Stage* by Hughs and John (2009) accurately reflects the heart of this project: “Poetry (is the) fusion of three arts: music, storytelling, and painting” (20). Digital Poetry is permeated with all three of these concepts. Digital poems allow words to flow like music, forming a story and painting pictures in one’s mind. Translating poetry into visual interpretation is what “competent” readers do, proposes Hastings in his article *PYV: The Poetry Video Project* (1997). In addition to being a creative and personal response to literature, digital poems also encompass multiple Common Core Standards: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6.5, and CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.6.5.

Our final project, a **Public Service Announcement,** combined persuasive writing with a multimodal layering of voice, images, video, and music. In a language arts classroom, creating the PSA would be the final step after guided writing and polishing of a persuasive/argumentative piece. Traditional forms of literacy education such as drafting and peer editing would be appropriate during the creating of this final project. The PSA, perhaps more than any other digital project, created an opportunity for sharing ideas and responses to literature across the globe by publishing these videos to YouTube.

For my PSA, I chose a theme found in both our classroom novel, *Starters* (Price, 2012), and my chosen text for this class, *The Graveyard Book*. The theme that joins these two novels is *teen homelessness*. In *The Graveyard Book,* the ending eludes to the trouble Bod will have in transitioning from an adolescent boy being raised by ghosts, to being a young adult in the real world, interacting with real people. He will start out with nothing: no home, no formal education, and no living support system. Unfortunately, I can easily envision Bod slipping into homelessness once he no longer has the protection of the graveyard or its inhabitants. In Starters, the main characters are homeless teens, trying to eek out a living by renting out their bodies to the local elderly, or Enders. To connect these two novels, I had to do quite a bit of inferring from the text. In order to create this PSA, I had to access prior knowledge from the previous three assignments. This project not only used all of the previous Common Core and State standards already referenced, but also touched on a few additional standards related to internet publishing and multimodal learning: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6.5 and CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.6.

As a future educator, I need to be prepared to teach the foundations of digital literacies in order to engage my students and help them learn what they will need to know to succeed in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Responding to literature in innovative, creative, and relevant ways will engage and challenge my students. That is my job as a teacher: to find ways to connect my students with the knowledge they need, and to provide them with a quality, hands-on experience that will stick with them throughout their adulthood. Foranzi and Leu said it best: “new literacies instruction is not only necessary and appropriate for young children; it will define their future” (2013). As educators it is imperative that we include digital literacies in our teaching tool box because they are relevant and important to our students. After all, *the new literacies are not a fad – they are the future.*

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